

Text: 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Title: Faithful stewards judged by Christ

Truth: Christ requires His servants to be obedient and loyal to Him.

Date/Location: April 5, 2020 (and previously January 7, 2001) at FBC

Introduction

Paul continues this section in 1 Corinthians regarding the divisions and factionalism in the assembly. This material on true and worldly wisdom, divisions, and spirituality must be very important because such a large section of Scripture is devoted to them.

Previously, he has told the Corinthians that:

- a) 1:29 – no flesh should glory in God’s presence
- b) 1:31 – glorying should be in the Lord
- c) 3:4 – divisions are evidence of carnality
- d) 3:5 – Paul and Apollos are ministers (servants)
- e) 3:21 – no man should glory in men

At this point, Paul expands the line of thinking in point (d). Whether you like Paul or not (and likely it is *not* in many Corinthians’ minds), the point is that he is carrying out a divinely-assigned stewardship. He has divinely-given authority. This is not an issue of like or not like. It is an issue of serving Christ side-by-side, all of us being servants of the Lord.

I. Faithful Stewardship, v. 1-2

Instead of putting any particular man on a pedestal, the Corinthians are commanded to *account* (consider, reckon, conclude, esteem) that Paul, Apollos, Peter, (and probably others) are no “big deal” in themselves. Here is what to consider them:

- A. Servants of Christ. The word means “under rower.” It is a subordinate, servant, or attendant. Think of the rowing galley under the ship in the classic film Ben Hur—filled with slaves chained to the ship. The idea of inferiority is conveyed. The minister performs an assigned function. The “over rower” is Christ. He is the one that runs the show.

- B. Stewards of the mysteries of God. This is the word which is the administrator of a house, a manager of domestic affairs for a family or minor. He has great responsibility, but is accountable to the master. The “mysteries of God” refers to divine revelation that God had hidden but now has now disclosed. Since this special disclosure is not written in the sky for all to see, God expects messengers to proclaim it widely.
- C. Notice how these are “of Christ” and “of God”. It is clear that the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father are at the apostle’s center of gravity. Paul is trying to impress this upon the Corinthians that they would have God and Christ in that central place that no one else should occupy.
- D. Lest we think that we are off the hook because Paul is talking of ministers of the gospel with regard to this stewardship, look at two different places where the same word for steward is used.
1. Titus 1:7 – **stewards** of God. This is written in the specific context of bishops (pastors). This gives the idea that pastors, God’s called men for preaching and teaching, are in some sense managers of God’s work on the earth. What an incredible responsibility to think that God has left Christian ministers on earth in this role (without infringing on His sovereignty!). So what would be the result of bad management?
 2. 1 Peter 4:10-11 – **stewards** of the manifold grace of God. Believers are stewards by default because “every man” has received a gift from God’s Spirit. We are commanded to exercise it!
- E. Paul states the requirement on stewards that they must be faithful. This word faithful is from *pistos*, meaning trustworthy, trustful believing, sure, and true. In the engagements listed above, a steward should be able to be counted upon.
- F. Study the parable in Luke 12:41-48 to see about faithful stewards. There are two possible attitudes and two corresponding outcomes. Note them:
- A. The faithful and wise attitude. The lord will make him ruler over his household. This one is blessed (42-44).

- B. The self-pleasing attitude. The servant will be cut in pieces and his portion will be with the unbelievers. Punishment is according to knowledge of the master's will (47-48). The servant's attitude is in his heart, but his actions demonstrate it.
- G. Why should people consider Paul et al. as servants and stewards? Because *that is what they are*. We are not asking you to think something that is untrue. Thinking something that is untrue is either self-deception (see last week's message) or *pretend*. We do not live in a false or pretend world. The actual fact is that famous missionaries and pastors are just servants of Christ and should be gratefully thought of as such. But don't forget the un-famous Christians who labor in obscurity at their assigned post in hard places or in difficult ministries.

II. Proper Judgment of Faithfulness, v. 3-5

Regarding the faithfulness required in stewards, Paul now launches into a section to describe **how faithfulness is truly determined**. Please note that if you read this with the thought that Paul is elevating himself above his readers in some kind of arrogant attitude, you read it incorrectly.

- A. Not the church's judgment (v. 3). The word for *judge* is means to scrutinize, investigate, interrogate, determine, ask, discern, examine, or search. This verb is used again in this verse and verse 4. The same root is used in verse 5.
1. Some evaluation is appropriate and necessary. If a man brings a false gospel or clearly wrong doctrine, he is to be noted and avoided—and that is according to Scripture (Rom. 16:17). If his fruit is rotten, then we are to beware of him (Matt. 7:15-20).
 2. Some in the church may feel that they can make an accurate assessment of Paul's ministry, but their judgment matters little to Paul. He is aiming for and really concerned about another evaluation.
 3. Paul's faithfulness was not something that could be properly evaluated by the Corinthian believers. Please do not think that you have some special powers that few other human beings have—that you can enter into the arena of judgment and make

some brilliant pronouncement. You can't because you simply do not know enough of the works and motivations of the servant of Christ.

4. The servant is only properly judged by his own master anyway. The Corinthians were not Paul's master, so their judgment was irrelevant. Romans 14:4 teaches us this principle which is very pertinent here. This helps us when we feel a critical spirit toward some other person. We may even be certain that they are doing wrong before the Lord. But GOD will take care of that, not YOU. This is a good reminder to "mind your own business" and let God mind the business of others.

B. Not a human court. This is similar to the previous statement, but expands Paul's thought to a formal human and perhaps secular court. If the church cannot properly judge Paul, certainly a courtroom of unbelieving people will have no hope of making a proper evaluation.

C. Not self-judgment (v. 4). Paul recognizes that he cannot properly assess his own ministry. He is biased; he is finite; he is sinful. Even if Paul knew nothing against himself, this fact would not justify him.

1. Still, Paul strives to live with a clear conscience, and so should we. See Acts 23:1, 24:16, 18:6, 20:26. Note that God cleansed his conscience from things like murder, Acts 22:20. See also 2 Cor. 4:2, Heb. 13:18. He knew of no unconfessed or habitual sins in his life. But he knows that he cannot know the extent of his own sin because of self-deception (Jer. 17:9-10).

2. This context is about evaluation of ministry stewardship, not evaluation of salvation. But as for the matter of salvation, beware: personal attempts at holiness or self-examination, no matter how diligently desired or thoroughly attained, can NOT save a person. Justification (to be declared righteous) is never by a person's own work of any sort. Romans 4:3, 5:1 show that justification is by faith.

D. The Lord's judgment (end of v. 4-5). The true judge is the Lord. Man's judgment cannot suffice because man is not capable of

doing what the Lord does: bringing to light and revealing. Therefore, Paul *commands* the believers: do not judge these faithful servants before the judgment seat of Christ.

1. Works of darkness and bad motivations are not always evident on the outside, but the Lord knows the heart (1 Sam. 16:7). Parallel passages are Luke 12:2-3 and 1 Tim. 5:24-25.
2. To Him belongs all judgment and from Him comes all true praise. He will distribute them according to His perfect standards (Gen. 18:25).
3. The fact that we will have to face Christ's evaluation makes the praise or criticism of men very unimportant.
4. He will include in His judgment those things that no one else knows, including the heart attitude of the steward. Works that are only apparently good will be revealed to be useless or bad. Works that were misunderstood as bad will be revealed as good. Works done in faith and obedience and love for God but secretly will be rewarded, while works done openly but lacking those noble and God-honoring motivations will be revealed for what they really are—filthy rags.

Conclusion

- A. Paul through inspiration of the Holy Spirit goes on in 4:6 to say that the Corinthians should learn to think not above what is written (in the Scriptures). We will look in more detail at this next time but this is the idea of the command in verse 1 that they account the men they revere instead as ministers and stewards, hopefully faithful ones. The substance is in Christ, not in men! Paul further says that it is not man's judgment that counts at all, but instead what God says that truly matters. Said another way, man's praise and commendation do not raise anyone's status with God. It is wrong, therefore, to focus on such.
- B. A number of applications fall out of this section.
 1. God's workers are ministers and stewards. This applies to "lay people" as well—actually there is no such thing as "the laity." What is the quality of my stewardship over what God has

entrusted to me? By the way, what has God entrusted to me, anyway? Is my stewardship faithful? Am I that faithful and wise steward?

2. On a related note, are you ready for the totally accurate and impartial judgment of Christ Jesus at his judgment seat?

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